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Ari M. Mattes
The University of Notre Dame, Australia [Sydney], ari.mattes@nd.edu.au

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ARI MATTES
The University of Notre Dame

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ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that the action film has been one of Hollywood's most successful products over the last three decades or so. However, many commentators, both popular and academic, continue to marginalize or dismiss the value of the action film as a critical, socially conscious, and aesthetically potent artefact. Scholarship that has approached the action film has tended to be based upon readings of gender and political ideology. Aesthetic readings of 1980s action films (the decade when the genre was at its peak), such as Eric Lichtenfeld's Action Speaks Louder *(2004), have tended to be dismissive of the films as examples of propagandistic, exceedingly patriotic 'Reaganite entertainments'. It is the intention of this article, through a close analysis of George P. Cosmatos' 1986 film* Cobra, *to demonstrate that – rather than simply a piece of replicatory right-wing propaganda – the 1980s action film (and action cinema in general) challenges the notions of American political identity, patriotism and heroism upon which it is founded, thereby opening the way for a deeper critical understanding of American cultural and mythical impulses at large.*

KEYWORDS

action cinema
American heroism
Sylvester Stallone
American culture
Hollywood
political propaganda
the western
urban alienation

> Contempt being nothing else but an immobility, or contumacy of the Heart, in resisting the action of certain things.
>
> (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*)

Eric Lichtenfeld's insightful study of the action film, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie*, marks *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967) as a pivotal point in the genesis of the modern action film,[1] with its 'staccato editing, slow motion, loud sound, and blood – so much blood', that 'at turns mesmerized, thrilled, repelled, and numbed audiences'. This new 'graphic violence [...] as spectacle would be deployed [in the 1970s and 1980s action film] more to pleasure audiences than to jar them [...] without [*Bonnie and Clyde*'s] social and cinematic critiques' (Lichtenfeld 2004: xvii). Lichtenfeld is accurate in tracing the action film back to *Bonnie and Clyde*,[2] but his argument that the action film somehow lacks the 'social and cinematic critiques' of New Hollywood works, such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, highlights an endemic assumption. This critical field has often treated the action film as an inferior aesthetic product, the output of an uncritically replicatory, deeply conservative, nationalistic, cinematic machine. That is, they posit that the action film – in particular, the 1980s action film, as Susan Jeffords, Lichtenfeld and others argue – is a prime example of a 'Reaganite entertainment', patriotic propaganda existing as a cinematic complement to Reagan's infamous 'evil empire' rhetoric and his 'Morning in America' re-election campaign.[3]

This assumption of melodramatic simplicity in terms of narrative – that the action film draws its narrative structures and energies from melodrama, in its simple and unambiguous manicheistic schema – and deep-rooted conservatism in terms of ideology, is symptomatic of many critics' contempt for the genre as a whole. Lichtenfeld, for example, argues that *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) is 'not strictly an action film' because 'its generic composition and frankly, its artistry, are too complex to justify such a reduction' (2004: 43–44).[4] Mark Gallagher notes this kind of critical denigration in *Action Figures: Men, Action Films, and Contemporary Adventure Narratives* (2006): 'action narratives' have been 'long categorized as too juvenile, too escapist, or simply too conservative to be the subject of a serious analysis' (2006: 6).[5]

A disdain for genre films in general seems to linger throughout Lichtenfeld's work. 'The films chosen' for analysis, he argues in the introduction, are few when considering 'overall quality' because 'genre film-making is first an exercise in repetition and mass-market appeal, it does not tend toward excellence' (Lichtenfeld 2004: xix–xx). Schopenhauer offers a diametrically opposed and, perhaps, more useful position. He praises the use of repetitive structuration as a key to determining artistic excellence: 'the merit of a writer who is worth reading is the greater the less it owes to his material, and even the more familiar and much-employed this material is' (Schopenhauer [1851] 1970: 200). Yvonne Tasker (2004: 1), Lisa Purse, Gallagher and many others, have noted the action film's pre-eminent global status. In *Action Figures*, for example, Gallagher notes that 'contemporary U.S. action films constitute the *lingua franca* of global film audiences' (2006: 17, original emphasis). Similarly, Purse argues in *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011) that 'action movies remain such a popular strand of Hollywood production' (2011: 1). An understanding of the action film is, given its continued economic dominance, critical to an understanding of contemporary American cinema culture.

The present article will negate a critical tradition that depicts action cinema as politically conservative and melodramatically facile – a tradition

1. Lichtenfeld never specifies what he means by 'modern' action film – and does not attempt to sketch any outline of the 'pre-modern' action film one assumes must logically exist. See Mattes (2010) for a detailed analysis of the failings of critics to accurately map out the genesis of the genre.
2. Given his mapping out of the traits of the genre as a combination of noir and the western, I think it is just as easily traced back to the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima crime films and westerns of the late 1940s and 1950s.
3. See Lichtenfeld:

   > 'In 1983, Reagan set a tone for the next several years when he famously cast the Soviet Union as the world's "Evil Empire", following his sharp mid-term decline in popularity and America's slide into a deep recession. Reinvigorated, this Cold War paranoia nourished the era's action films. Reaganite entertainments, to be sure, these movies stress the threat posed to society by an enemy, often a horde, that is *other*, [...] In response, the hero's mission becomes one of extermination. [...] For the action hero, this purging regenerates not only his own spirit but the community's as well.'
   >
   > (2004: 60)

4. It is not, in fact, an action film – but this is regardless of perceived 'artistry' or complexity.

that continues to nullify the critical and aesthetic value of many action films as tense, complex and highly ambiguous cultural artefacts.[6] Through a close reading of George P. Cosmatos' film *Cobra* (1986), which Lichtenfeld identifies as exemplary of the genre in the 1980s, I argue that the American action film is in fact deeply critical of American society and culture. More importantly, it will be shown to be innately self-critical through its simultaneous deployment and critique of the tools of the modern: its simultaneous fetishization of, and disgust at, the tools and techniques of cinema itself. The action film – recalling Leo Marx's seminal analysis of American cultural impulses at large – encodes, reviles and affirms the classic American tension between the 'machine' and the 'garden' (see Marx 1964). It envisions the return of civilization to a Virgillian state of harmony between man and nature, yearning for Crèvecœur's simple, heroic existence in the agrarian garden, and yet is perennially unable to fulfil this fantasy. It is, at the same time, drawn away from the 'garden' towards the 'machine', demonstrating a self-destructive drive for technological acceleration, exemplified by its increasingly explicit fetishization of weaponry. Unable to resolve this contradiction, the only recourse for the action hero is, like James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking at the end of *The Pioneers* ([1823] 1988), a marked retreat from society. The action hero has caused no lasting change – the American culture and society still moves towards technophilic obliteration. Nevertheless, he struggles on, alone in an unforgiving cosmos, in an essentially entropic, fated order; Sisyphus with his stone. There is violence but no regeneration.

Lichtenfeld extends Richard Slotkin's ideas about the permeation of frontier mythology in American culture to a discussion of the 1970s and 1980s action film. But Slotkin's idea of the heroic purging of evil from society that results in the restoration of a harmonious halcyon state – the 'regeneration' engendered by the titular character's gunslinging in *Shane* (Stevens, 1953) – no longer applies when discussing 1980s action films. The threat of technological obliteration presides over the nuclear-phobic action films of this era, nullifying the potential for 'regeneration'. The endings of action films are, indeed, frequently enshrouded in a tone of dark nihilism that belies any notion of triumph over evil. The viewer (and hero) has been subjected to – and participated in – an exchange of violence and counter-violence, but with no overt outcome.

This lack of positivism positions the action film closer to classical tragedy than, as both Gallagher (1999) and Scott Higgins (2008) have argued, to melodrama. The hero may have violently defeated the villain by the conclusion, but it has all essentially been for no end. Notwithstanding the apparent 'free will' of the protagonist, society itself continues its headlong rush towards destruction. The yellow brick road may be intact, but it is splattered in blood; a mushroom cloud, rather than a benevolent wizard, waits at its end. This is apocalypse in the negative – rather than revelatory – sense; the technological apocalypse that political scientist James Combs analyses in 'Pox-eclipse now: The dystopian imagination in contemporary popular movies' (1993).

Furthermore, the action film is polysemous, inviting an often-contradictory range of readings that destabilize any possibility of a clearly enunciated ideological position.[7] It can just as easily be read in terms of its liberal impulses – the anarchic *jouissance* that, as Jerome Charyn points out, French critics saw in the American comic strip[8] – as it can in terms of the kind of 'neoconservative' discourse suggested by Tony Williams (1999). Under this reading, the action hero becomes a kind of everyman liberator: battling an unforgiving, dogmatic and corrupt system, an egalitarian benefactor promoting a legacy

5. Gallagher is mistaken, in the sense that there was a substantial body of serious criticism dedicated to the action film in 2006 (Tasker, Jeffords, Arroyo, Lichtenfeld and others), and the field has continued to expand since then (Lisa Purse's *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011), for example). However, he is right in arguing that criticism has *tended* to categorize action cinema as 'juvenile', 'escapist' and 'conservative'.

6. There are other problems endemic in action film criticism that shall not be discussed here – such as the critical genealogy that traces the action film back to the Spielberg and Lucas extravaganzas of the 1970s, firmly (and fallaciously) associating the action film with the production of big-budget Hollywood spectacle, thereby confusing aesthetic and industrial categories (see e.g. Gross 2000: 3–9).

7. It should be noted that I am using terms such as 'ideology', 'ideological', 'politics' and 'political' in a limited sense in this article, in terms of party politics and systems of governance in America (Democrat : Republican; Left: Right wing; democracy : oligarchy), rather than in terms of the balance and distribution of power inherent in any system. When I argue that the action film is 'apolitical' I am arguing that it does not conform to a clear party-political position – that it is not propaganda for party-politics, as critics have argued. Obviously the action film is 'political' in a general sense, in that any and every text

is 'political'. Obviously it is constituted by, and constitutes, an ideological position a la Foucault, in that any and every text adheres to and is directed by the ideological web around it.

8. See Charyn: 'The French saw a freedom in the American *bande dessineé*, a perverse, anarchic continent of line and color' (1996: 143).

9. Recalling, perhaps, Virilio's well-known analogy between weapon and camera in *War and Cinema*.

of social justice. This kind of politicization of the action film is, in any case, missing the point. The action film is, through its apocalypticism, consciously apolitical, aptly fitting into the apocalyptic tradition of American art discussed by Christopher Sharrett in 'The American apocalypse: Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*' (1984). Its tendency towards annihilation consciously undermines any political position; its anarchic and amoral impulse towards violence invokes the registers of tragedy rather than melodrama.

The action films of the 1980s are leaner, meaner, more violent and less driven by spectacle than those of subsequent eras. They fit the aesthetic criteria of the genre to a far greater degree than the self-consciously hip, tongue-in-cheek action films of the 1990s or the effects-driven spectaculars of the new millennium. *Cobra*, given Stallone's personal reputation as a staunch Republican, and the deep-seated conservatism that has been attributed to the film by many critics is an ideal subject for an argument against the bestowal of ill-fitting political and ideological readings to the genre.

The narrative of *Cobra* is structured around the violent struggle between police officers Lieutenant Marion 'Cobra' Cobretti (Sylvester Stallone) and his partner Gonzales (Reni Santoni) on one side and the paramilitaristic horde of killers known as the New World led by the Night Slasher (Brian Thompson) on the other. Fashion model Ingrid (Brigitte Nielsen) is a witness to one of the New World's murders, and much of the film follows Cobretti protecting Ingrid from the killers. The film's climax is a magnificent battle sequence in an orchard in southern California. Cobretti impales the Night Slasher on a giant hook before riding off, with Ingrid on the back of his motorcycle, into the sunset. This narrative certainly appears to follow a standard melodramatic structure of hero versus villain. Good triumphs over evil; our hero and heroine live happily ever after; social order has been restored. However, this reading of manichean simplicity is challenged by the extreme anti-social violence of the film's 'hero'.

The opening sequence, a gun-into-camera introduction, recalls similar sequences in both *Magnum Force* (Post, 1973) and *Brannigan* (Hickox, 1975), and immediately establishes the film's excessively belligerent tone. Stallone's recognizable voice drawls over a shot tracking from a cartoon image of a cobra on the pearl stock of a Colt .45, to a leather-gloved hand raising the gun and pointing it directly at the viewer. 'In America, there's a burglary every eleven seconds', Stallone says, 'an armed robbery every sixty-five seconds, a violent crime every twenty-five seconds, a murder every twenty-four minutes, and two hundred and fifty-four rapes a day'. A harsh, discordant background noise, mechanical and inhuman, is in counterpoint to – and, perhaps, in disturbing symbiosis with – the methodical brutality of Stallone's countenance. The camera closes in on the barrel of the gun.[9] A bullet is fired at the camera. Its slow-motion, head-on trajectory is complemented by a crescendo in the disharmonic background noise, completing the film's aggressive assault of the viewer. On impact with the camera's 'eye', the bullet explodes into the title of the film, silhouetted against a blood-red sky. This is an ultra-violent world – and Stallone is a part of it. Indeed, with this sequence, the film positions itself as a bullet targeted at the face – and sensibilities – of the viewer.

After the opening sequence, the first scene follows a motorcyclist, the 'Supermarket Killer' (Marco Rodriguez), riding through Los Angeles. He parks his bike, walks into a supermarket and opens fire on the customers inside. Cobretti is called in to end the siege, and he stalks and executes the Supermarket Killer in brutal, vengeful fashion. The Supermarket Killer first

appears on-screen framed by the red sun, riding towards the viewer, which recalls the film's title card of a few moments before, establishing a symbiotic relationship between the Killer and the film itself. The trajectory of Stallone's bullet, travelling towards the camera, is similarly mirrored by the Killer riding towards the viewer, amplifying the unsettling similarity between Stallone's violence, directed at the viewer, and the violence of the Killer, directed at the people of urban America.

The Supermarket Killer's ride through Los Angeles is intercut with images of the members of the New World clashing axes together in the sewer, in a kind of primal war dance. This macabre ritualism recalls the triplex ritualism[10] of the opening gun-into-camera sequence, again confirming a connection between Stallone and the killers. The New World inhabit the underside of Los Angeles (a chic tinseltown, epitomized by model Ingrid) which is not antithetical to, but rather the complement of, the world of Cobretti as cop/hunter/killer.[11] Indeed, at this point, the only indication that Stallone is to be the hero of the film is the viewer's existing knowledge of Stallone playing heroes. In the opening sequence, Stallone has addressed the viewer regarding a crisis of violence in America, simultaneously perpetrating a violent act against the viewer. He perpetuates the violence he decries by literally shooting at the viewer, and our uneasiness regarding this 'hero' is mirrored within the film itself. Having executed the Supermarket Killer, Cobretti reaches towards one of the liberated hostages, and she looks up at him, shattered. Like the viewer, perhaps, she is too traumatized to accept the proffered hand.

There is something brashly unsubtle about the opening sequences. The film explicitly jars viewers out of comfort, offering no apologies for the violent, amoral world into which they are thrust. The cross-cuts between killer-motorcyclist and killers in the sewer are in rhythm with the discordant industrial sounds associated with the killers. These sounds are also heard behind Stallone's violent opening, indicating the film's consciousness of its own mephitic nature as it transports the viewer into this vile sewer-world. This awareness is further exemplified in both the stylishness of the opening sequence – the use of a fish-eye lens for no apparent reason, suggesting effect for its own sake – and the superfluity, and thus futility, of this stylishness. The film explicitly positions itself as participant in the mechanisms of the anarchic, literally warped, death and destruction that it narrates. It immediately problematizes our identification with Stallone as hero, making the experience of rooting for a hero – necessary to the emotional integrity of melodrama – impossible.

Film critic J. Hoberman's assessment that 'Cobra is a glorified terrorist. The difference is he's one of ours' (1986: 52) is intended as an indictment of the film. However, it is in fact the source from which the film derives its energy – the perpetual ambivalence of the boundaries between heroism and villainy, violence and order. Cobretti is, indeed, a fascinating amalgamation of hero and terrorist. Lichtenfeld's assessment of Cobretti's 'righteous and widespread purging' (2004: 74), a 'purging [that] regenerates not only his own spirit but the community's as well' (2004: 60) fails to ring true from the outset. Cobretti ruthlessly executes the Supermarket Killer – but for no moral consequence. The hostage is just as terrified of Cobretti as she was of the Killer. There is no moral rebirth in *Cobra* (and, arguably, in the action film in general) – of hero, society, victim or villain – just social and physical destruction: annihilation. *Cobra* is characterized by a fundamentally apocalyptic,[12] rather than regenerative, drive.

10. The ritualism of Stallone relishing his almost sado-erotic relationship with his gun, tenderly massaging it with his leather-gloved hands, the methodical tracking shot across the stock and barrel in rhythm with Stallone's slow drawl and the background industrial soundscape, and the symbiosis that is established between gun and camera, directly equates Stallone with the killers.

11. This intimacy is most explicitly expressed in the motel sequence prior to the climactic showdown, where Cobretti, having just made love to Ingrid, turns his attention to his signature mega-gun, assembling it with a tenderness reminiscent of the undressing of a sexual partner prior to love-making, demonstrating the same kind of intimacy with violence that the Night Slasher displays towards his own weapon of choice, his massive knife – each tool of violence as pornographically depicted as the other.

12. As aforementioned, I am using 'apocalyptic' in terms of its negative rather than revelatory connotation.

Cosmatos, as Lichtenfeld notes, referred to his film as an example of 1980s noir. *Cobra*, like noir, is permeated by a sense of the fatal irony of Greek tragedy rather than the righteous moralism of melodrama. Like noir, it is energized by a profound cultural and critical uneasiness. The maniacs of the New World murder for the gratification of their own dystopian vision. Their nihilistic acts of violence reflect the dark, nihilistic tone of the film. Their 'natural' hunting ground is the desolate, crepuscular-neon Los Angeles, a city displaying, like the killers of the New World, the symptoms of decay; the neuroses of an over-extended modernity. Their ideology and membership are peculiarly non-specific. They congregate in sewers and abandoned factories, mirroring the eclipse of progress in an age of technological hyper-acceleration – the deracination of the Enlightenment ideal of progress via science and industrialization. Perhaps most critically, these antagonists come from within the normal social order. The New World includes businessmen and police officers as well as leather-clad iconoclasts. They represent the elite and working class alike; they do not, as Lichtenfeld and others have asserted, come from outside to disrupt moral America – they are not 'an enemy [...] that is *other*' (2004: 60, original emphasis), but a systemic part of the normative social order of modern urban America.

In fact, Cobretti is the outcast, the freak, exterior to the normal social order, perpetually under attack from every level of society. He is, as Gonzalez says to Ingrid, a 'fugitive from the fifties'. His Christian name, Marion – an explicit reference to iconic gunslinger John Wayne – emphasizes his eccentricity, as does his healthy diet, his peculiar style of dress, his solitude, and his antagonism to almost everyone and everything around him. He is a remarkably anti-social hero. Combs gestures towards this development in the American heroic order when he writes about post-Vietnam War changes to the type of the western hero:

> he (occasionally she, as in *Aliens*) has largely ceased to be a clear agent of the community who acts because he or she shares their values and wants to see justice done. Now the hero (or, if you prefer, anti-hero) is more likely to be a functional alienate himself, acting out of some private motive stemming from his alienation from society, if incidentally or unwittingly serving a social purpose ('law and order' or somesuch). The Bruce Willis character of the *Die Hard* movies, the Sigourney Weaver character in *Aliens*, certainly Harry Callahan, and even the superheroes of *Batman* and *Darkman* are all in different ways alienates with a purpose, even though that purpose is more or less independent of traditional heroic function and restraint. Such postmodern heroes usually exist in some kind of catastrophic setting, but survive because they see through the organizational or political bullshit and act out their own private motif of action, within the context of heroic roles in which they do not believe, and for purposes with which they profess no allegiance.
>
> (1993: 21–23)

Catastrophe is, in the post-Vietnam Hollywood action film, '*a given*' (Combs 1993: 23, original emphasis). Cobretti, like the killers of the New World, is a personification of the sprawling anti-sociality of postmodern Los Angeles, as dissected by Baudrillard in his panegyric to the United States, *America* (1988). In *Cobra*, the urban is no longer the eviscerated, melancholy space of John Huston's asphalt jungle, but instead a chaotic, excessively consumeristic dystopia with

sensibilities of neon-noir excess.[13] Its spatial character is a confusion of extreme wealth and glamour, extreme poverty and urban desolation – a confusion mirrored in the oscillation of Cosmatos' cinematic technique between superfluous style and brutal violence. Los Angeles is both the locus of, and inspiration for, the extreme violence of the film, and Cobretti is on intimate terms with its grimy streets. The very nomenclature of his police unit – 'Zombie Squad' – reflects the funereal gloom of the city. The most moral characters of *Cobra* are inept – bureaucratic Detective Monte (Andy Robinson) and Captain Sears (Art LaFleur) – representative of the 'organizational [and] political bullshit' through which Cobretti must struggle. His shocking amoral functionality is clearly 'independent of traditional heroic function and restraint'. This is most apparent in the final factory sequence, when he leers down at an antagonist doused in petrol. 'You have the right to remain silent', he says, an aside for the viewer, before striking a match on his pistol and setting him alight. The antagonist's piercing screams echo throughout the factory. Cobretti looks down at the burning body, red light from the fire reflected on his face and turns away to continue with the killing. The opening scene of the final sequence assumes the tropes of a slasher film, Cobretti stalking the henchmen of the New World. Sylvester Levay's score takes a suspenseful turn as it accompanies these ruthless acts of extermination.

Lichtenfeld notes the similarities between *Dirty Harry* (Siegel, 1971) and *Cobra*: 'Both of these heroes [Harry Callahan and Cobretti] are of the action film's urban vigilante tradition; but if Harry is its archetype, then Cobra is its apotheosis' (2004: 73). Cosmatos' *mise-en-scène* is both extremely slick and excessively violent. Whilst the universe of *Dirty Harry* is, to a degree, defined by light as well as darkness,[14] the universe of *Cobra* is, as it were, pure night. The film consciously appropriates its roots – we immediately recognize Andy Robinson as Scorpio from *Dirty Harry*, and Reni Santoni is both Callahan's and Cobretti's partner, named Gonzalez in both films – and then, recalling Cobretti in the opening sequence, terrorizes them.

The brilliant robot-street montage, the most stylish of the film, emphasizes the ambiguity of the apocalyptic potential in the modern-urban – and Cobretti's intimacy with it. The sequence takes place a quarter of the way through the film, and is framed by a clandestine meeting between Monte, Sears, Cobretti and Gonzales, in which Cobretti is given *carte-blanche* to use any means necessary to capture or kill the members of the New World. The meeting occurs in a desolate car park, framed by an alienating, bleak cityscape. The monolithic buildings suggest the forsakenness of this world, thus setting the scene for – but, crucially, neither justifying nor moralizing – the Zombie Squad's brutal methods. From this stark neon-noir setting, the film flash-cuts, in sync with the diastolic accents of Robert Tepper's pop song 'Angel of the City', between images of the elite and the destitute. Glamorous Ingrid at a fashion photo shoot is juxtaposed with images of the city's down-and-outs; the tramps, drunks, whores and pimps. Scenes of Cobretti and Gonzales trolling the streets are intercut with the New World's elaborate preparations for violence, both groups straddling the line between these two sides of Los Angeles, reminding us of Slotkin's hero as 'the man who knows Indians' (1992: 14), connecting the civilization to the wilderness by corporealizing the contradictory values of both.[15] The chic photo-shoot, with its stylized lighting, gowns, and props, is contrasted with the neon-lit debris of the streets. Cobretti, at a tattoo parlour, studies a tattoo identified with the New World, and the film cuts almost instantaneously to an identical emblem graffitied on

13. William J. Palmer writes about this 1980s aesthetic in *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History*.

14. The bus of school children, Gonzalez's tender relationship with his wife and his domestically-driven decision to leave the police department gesture towards a light that contrasts with the violence of Harry and Scorpio.

15. Although, it should be noted, Cobretti and Gonzales – as figures from the working class – certainly seem more at ease in the urban wilderness than in the glamorous world of Ingrid and high fashion.

a wall. Chic art and street art – Ingrid and the killers – are fused together in the forge of consumerism. Who is the 'angel of the city'? Is it Ingrid, or the indigent on the streets? Is it the New World, or Cobretti and Gonzales? Where is the city? In the stylized shoot, the tattoo shops, alleys and sewers of the New World, or the gutters through which the heroes trudge? It is, the film suggests, potentially in all of these. Under this song of the city, the sophisticated and slick, the poor and indigent, and the psychopathic and valorous become inextricably intertwined.

This nightmarish vision of Los Angeles' criminal and non-criminal underbelly scratches at the sheen of Hollywood, as epitomized in the photo-shoot scene: the cliché of sleazy photographer Dan (David Rasche) trying to bed Ingrid post-shoot, and the MTV-esque style of Cosmatos' montage and *mise-en-scène* itself. Each of the city's elements – the sewers, the beautiful, the rich, the poor, the neon streets – is woven together into an exquisite tapestry, an exercise in cinematic style that is at the same time a self-erasing testament of the excesses of late-industrial capitalism. This volta of sorts presages an irruption of horrific violence. The New World killers attack Ingrid in the car park, axing Dan in the stomach and crushing a security guard against the wall. This brutality, perhaps, is a kind of ironic reproach for the chic and sleek nature of the film itself.

Indeed, despite the film's advanced technical cinematicity, *Cobra* demonstrates a marked disgust at modern consumer culture throughout. The film overtly champions the Supermarket Killer's destruction of goods in the opening sequence, evident from many close-ups of goods being destroyed. The film's obvious delight in this transformation of supermarket into wasteland is most clearly manifest in Cobretti's response to the Supermarket Killer's threat to blow up the store: 'Go ahead. I don't shop here'. This delight is itself savaged when, moments later, the Supermarket Killer murders a young clerk, having just granted him permission to leave. He pumps the shotgun, raises it and blasts the clerk in the back. The clerk flies through the air and ploughs into a Christmas tree, a kitsch plastic snowman waving to the viewer from the rear of the frame. Myriad other acts of violence throughout the film are similarly entwined with the radical consumerism of the age. This is particularly resonant in the sign above Cobretti's head as he hunts the Supermarket Killer: 'This is a good place to shop'.

Cobretti, with his 1950s car and jeans, appears at times as something of an antidote to this corrupting hyper-modernity, lending credence to Lichtenfeld's linking of the film to Reagan's 'Morning in America' campaign and the idea of American regeneration through violence. He spins his gun after shooting the Supermarket Killer, a gunslinger, an anachronism, an avenging angel, in every way opposed to the New World. The print and television media, the world of fashion and advertising, are all envisioned as products of a modern robotic psychopathy created by, and revealed in, the character of the city. However, Cobretti himself, as Vincent Canby notes, is virtually a walking advertisement from a men's fashion magazine, 'model[ling] a lot of designer jeans and distressed leather jackets' (1986: H21). He is explicitly tied to the consumer culture that he appears to vehemently oppose. A large Pepsi sign dominates the exterior of Cobretti's apartment, and a Toys R Us Christmas advertisement plays on the television as Cobretti cleans his gun following the supermarket attack. As in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) and recent films such as *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002) and *The Island* (Bay, 2005), the film's dystopian vision of consumerist excess is ironized by its own use of product placement.

Similarly, *Cobra*'s critique of the pathology of the modern is continually ironized and undercut by the processes of the film itself. The viewer is engaged in the cinematic process, and there is perhaps no greater example of commodification in the modern age than the multi-billion dollar Hollywood movie industry. Cobretti's gun is pointed directly at the viewer in the introductory scene: is the viewer also a symptom of the New World? Are we, too, products of a virus that needs to be eradicated?

We are exhilarated, or at least engaged, by the violence and action in the film. Our viewing, in an extradiegetic sense, facilitates the pathology of the killers within the film (and is a symptom of the same pathology). Modern technology – in particular, the televisual – is portrayed as exceedingly distasteful from the outset of the film. Swarms of journalists hover outside the supermarket hustling for the scoop, and television is one of the primary tools of the New World, as we see when the Supermarket Killer screams at Cobretti: 'You bring in the TV or I'll kill 'em all. You understand? It's the way of the New World'. His sentiment is a reflection of every person's dream in the new world – to be on television.

Cobretti, on the other hand, despises the media. He burns his newspaper following the siege, after cursorily glancing at the headlines. Yet, he uses the security cameras in the supermarket to locate the killer, and the personal address system (another product of the modern) to taunt him: 'Hey dirtbag. You're a lousy shot. I don't like lousy shots. You wasted a kid for nothing. Now I think it's time to waste you'. Cobretti employs the tools of the New World in order to destroy the New World – mirroring the use of technology by Stallone and Cosmatos in presenting the viewer with the technically expert *Cobra*.

While the opening sequence encodes this doubleness – self-revolting, self-critical, challenging its own aggressive cinematicity – the final shot of the film completes Cobretti's retreat from the modern. He and Ingrid hit the highway on a motorcycle, riding away from the New World and the urban complex into the nostalgic America of the road, of Whitman, London and Kerouac. A final affirmation, perhaps, supporting Lichtenfeld's 'Morning in America' link. And yet, ironically, the motorcycle itself is the product and tool of the New World – it belongs to one of the killers. Cobretti's final movement towards camera, then, aptly echoes the Supermarket Killer's opening movement towards the camera, against a blood-red backdrop. At the film's end, however, the fire of the sun has become purple storm clouds: explicitly threatening Cobretti and Ingrid's future as they ride into the solitude of life on the road. In his retreat from the mania of the modern, he is in fact employing – riding on, in fact – the tool of this mania itself. His actions recall Nietzsche's crisis of the modern – how can one dismantle the master's house using the master's tools?

This is the tension inherent in *Cobra* – and the action film in general – which Lichtenfeld indicates when, in his discussion of *The Gauntlet* (Eastwood, 1977), he suggests the 'action genre's ambivalent relationship with hardware' (2004: 41). Cobretti hates the modern technological order and yet adores, in an almost erotic manner, his gun (replete with advanced technology). But Lichtenfeld never extends his analysis to relate this contradiction to the American cultural forces from which it is derived. Tocqueville, Henry Adams, D. H. Lawrence, Stephen Spender, Leo Marx and Baudrillard, amongst others, have written about the cultural and historical significance of this tension between 'machine' and 'garden' as a creative force in American culture. The American hero is riven by these contradictory impulses, towards technology,

the future, and the modern on the one hand; and the agrarian, the nostalgic, and the domestic on the other. The setting of *Cobra*'s finale – an abandoned factory – is thus particularly poignant. This sequence evokes one of the formative passages of American cultural history: the transformation of America from garden to machine, from agrarian to technological-modern, recalling the train-incursion incident in Thoreau's '*Walden*'.[16]

The grimy factory is a symbol of modernity and a derailed industrial age, reflected in the dementia of modern man. Lichtenfeld is correct in his assertion that 'The masculinity of this environment makes it the perfect stage for the final confrontation between Cobra and the Night Slasher' (2004: 76). However, as an inoperative factory,[17] it is also a symbol of masculinity decontextualized, of the failure of humanity in light of the modern industrial order. It is symbolic of a defunct, anti-social masculinity in which both Cobretti and the Night Slasher are representative participants. They are both equally at home in this hellish non-space. Primal man is pitted against the industrial (New World) in the very arena of the industrial's collapse. Enlightenment logic has failed in the face of capital, and the only answer is the infinite generation of violence.

Many critics, both popular and academic, have read *Cobra* as lurid nationalistic melodrama. Leonard Maltin writes: 'Once more, Stallone wraps himself in the American flag and fights for the greater glory of mankind by going after criminal vermin' (2007: 259). *Cobra* is 'Typical low-grade action fare, where all the other cops are stubborn dummies, and all the bad guys are repellent creeps' (Maltin 2007: 259). Susan Doll writes that 'The equation of common criminals and lawbreakers with a lunatic neo-Fascist group is a simple-minded view of crime and its causes [...] The vigilante films of the 1980's [*sic*] offer a simplistic, cathartic solution to the problems that seem uncontrollable to the general populace' (1987: 131). Hoberman notes the dominance of the photo of Reagan on Cobretti's desk (1986: 52). Lichtenfeld writes that 'Cobra's house is decorated with not one, but two American flags' (2004: 69–71). *Cobra* is envisioned thus as a triumphalistic affirmation of vigilantism and the extermination of the evil 'other' from American society. The action film portrays a 'righteous action hero' battling an 'array of enemies aligned against America' (Lichtenfeld 2004: 62).

Elements in the film appear to support these readings. The narrative is simple, modelled on cop-catching-con films of the past, and appears to follow the simple visions of hero and villain derived from Victorian stage melodrama. Cobretti is a hero battling villains in a hostile environment. At times, Cobretti appears as a kind of societal avenger, purging its malaise. The film was certainly marketed this way. Its infamous tagline – 'Crime is a disease. Meet the cure', positions Stallone as a methodical doctor, curing society of its criminal cancer. However, it is equally possible to regard *Cobra* as a liberal cry to action. In this reading, the working stiff is called to arms to fight against myriad social and industrial systems, in order to purge them of their endemic excess and corruption. Gallagher and Lichtenfeld acknowledge the tension within the action film between these two ideological impulses.[18] Certain action films enable consistent ideological readings. *Red Dawn* (Milius, 1984), for example, is clearly an anti-communist tract: a pro-patria call to arms. *The Running Man* (Glaser, 1987), on the other hand, paints communistic revolutionaries as explicitly heroic in their revolt against a repressive plutocracy. But most action films – and *Cobra* is no exception – are not structured around political ideology, and a reading according to political impulse is easily undercut by its ever-present political

16. The incident is recalled in *The Portable Thoreau*: 'The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard' (Thoreau [1854] 1977: 367); 'I watch the passage of the morning cars with the same feeling that I do the rising of the sun, which is hardly more regular' (Thoreau [1854] 1977: 368); 'The startings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in the village day. They go and come with such regularity and precision, and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well conducted institution regulates a whole country ... There is something electrifying in the atmosphere' (Thoreau [1854] 1977: 369).

17. Even though the machines are functional and there's a security guard present, the factory is empty.

18. Gallagher notes that *Dirty Harry*'s rebellious behaviour 'can be interpreted as either countercultural or reactionary' (2006: 11). Lichtenfeld similarly notes the 'counterintuitive strain of libertarianism' (2004: 20) in *Dirty Harry* (and by extension the action film, given he sees *Dirty Harry* as the archetype for this).

countercurrent. Gallagher allows the necessity of analysis outside of the realm of politics, if one is to regard action films on their own terms: 'Action cinema in particular engages viewers by dispensing with questions of social utility' (2006: 7). Lichtenfeld similarly writes that *Dirty Harry*'s 'organizing principle is its violent conflicts, rather than its ideological ones' (2004: 22).

In truth, *Cobra* is simultaneously conservative and subversive; reactionary and radically liberal. Combs categorizes a 'Caesarian' vision in modern dystopia cinema which attempts, through an accelerated neo-Imperialism, to reassert America's glory days, including some action films (*Iron Eagle* (Furie, 1986)) and some adventure films (*Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977)) in this category. But it is his qualification that is particularly worth noting: 'It is tempting to see in all this a "subtext" of neo-fascism, but that isn't necessarily so. Certainly there is a nostalgia for adventure, mastery, and revitalization of stable male and female roles based on Nietzschean primitivism'. However, 'Reassertions of masculine domination and institutional power do not add up to a political agenda', even if 'they do suggest a yearning for things to be' regenerated in the fashions of the past (Combs 1993: 31).

In any case, collectivism certainly is not proffered by *Cobra* as the answer to the modern 'disease'. Neither is Cobretti, despite the tagline of the film and his polemic to Ingrid about the inadequacies of American jurisprudence. The struggle to assign a clear political–ideological structure to *Cobra* is ultimately futile – the polysemous nature of the film enables contradictory political readings. The register of *Cobra* is not political but apocalyptic, recalling, through its obsession with a fated, futile existence, and its championing of brutal and arbitrary vengeance, Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedy. America, in *Cobra*, encodes its own annihilation. It presents a dissolute, technophilic, deracinated society – incurably dark, nihilistic and anarchic.

It is not that there are no ethical positions in the world of *Cobra* – questions of ethics, morality and justice, vis-à-vis crime and punishment, are in play throughout the film. But the values of the binaries that are the basis of a clear ideological structure – good/evil, order/anarchy, conservative/liberal and so on – are perpetually shifting and ambivalent. The 'hero' employs technology that is linked to a dystopian, dissolute society. He functions through, and is a function of, it. His actions, demeanour, and mannerisms are, furthermore, perpetually intertwined with the actions of the 'villains'. He is the figure that Jacques Rancière identifies in Aristotle's *Politics*: 'the apolitical individual, a being with neither hearth nor home who is either "above humanity" or else abject [...] this cityless being, is a lover of war [...] a non-cooperator, an "isolated piece at draughts"' (1995: 27). Violence begets violence, resulting not in patriotic, optimistic affirmation and resolution, but rather in a profound sense of negation, of the inevitable failure of humanity in the face of increasingly violent modern and industrial forces. Cobretti is, like Prometheus, bound to his own violent destiny.

Cobra is, indeed, more of a nihilistic jeremiad than, as Lichtenfeld and others argue, a vociferation of party allegiance, a recasting of a vote for Reagan, or an attempt to heal the wounds left in the American male psyche by the failures of the Vietnam War. Combs contextualizes the 1980s action film in terms of such post-Vietnam cinema; a cinema that 'became more apocalyptic in the negative sense, with no clear triumph of good or evil and indeed often the vision of the recrudescent power of evil, ineradicable and recurrent as an avenging force' (1993: 23). This bleak vision of humanity is, in *Cobra* as in the other major action films of the 1980s, the product of the development of

forces already at work within American civilization – the killers of the New World come from within the normative social order. Regarding apocalyptic crises in post-Vietnam genre cinema, Combs writes

> The fundamental problem is not an externally-imposed 'crisis' [...] that can be managed, rather it is that the socio-logic inherent in the development of the system itself will lead to a catastrophe that is internally-induced [...] the fatal flaw is fundamental and systemic and not an aberration imposed from outside or by an idiosyncratic individual.
>
> (1993: 24)

Colin MacArthur, in *Underworld U.S.A.*, suggests that the western signifies America speaking to America about its agrarian past, and the gangster film about its urban present (1972: 18). I extend MacArthur's idea, and postulate that the action film signifies America speaking to itself about its technological and cinematic *presence*. It never theorizes this critique, which makes it all the more potent, as it avoids the didacticism common to self-theorizing artworks. Mirroring Stallone's turning of his gun on the audience at the beginning of *Cobra*, the action film turns the gun on America itself.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ari Mattes has written on nineteenth-century American literature, American action cinema and Australian literature and cinema. He is currently lecturing in English and Australian literature at the University of Notre Dame, Sydney, whilst completing a monograph derived from his PhD thesis, *Action! America*, a detailed analysis of the action film in its American context. He has had short fiction published in Australian and international journals and is currently completing a novel, *The Bleeding*.

Contact: 417 Harris St., Ultimo, Sydney, NSW, Australia, 2007.
E-mail: ari.mattes@nd.edu.au